

Section 1: Research Digest

Literature, Libraries & Publishing

Rhyme and Reason: Developing Contemporary Poetry

A study carried out by BML and BMRB on behalf of the Arts Council of England [UK]

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Objectives

The main aim of the research was to increase understanding of the market for poetry, especially contemporary poetry, in order that publishers and booksellers may be able to increase sales of poetry, and particularly of contemporary poetry.

Methodology

The methods used were [i] an analysis of existing data on poetry sales, [ii] interviews with publishers and booksellers, [iii] a statistical analysis of poetry readers and buyers, and [iv] face-to-face in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with readers and non-readers of contemporary poetry. The first three elements were carried out by Book Marketing Ltd [BML], the fourth by the British Market Research Bureau [BMRB].

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Summary

There is a high degree of concentration in poetry publishing, with a high proportion of sales accounted for by a small number of imprints, titles and authors. Three imprints accounted for more than 60% of sales in 1998/9. Contemporary poetry represented only 3% of the volume and 4% of the value of sales, with one imprint contributing 90% of sales and one author 67% of sales. Factors affecting the sale of poetry were found to be price, design, size and format of books and sales policy. Price was more important for potential buyers, design was seen as important to attract browsers. Poetry was perceived as becoming less readily available in bookshops but booksellers wanted more point-of-sale material. Readings in shops did not seem to be stimulating sales and reviews in the media were seen to be in decline in both quantity and quality. Radio and television were seen to provide little support.

Most purchases of poetry were made by women aged 45 or over in non-manual social groups but there were seen to be several poetry markets. There appeared to be a core market with a broader market of more general book buyers who would buy some poetry. There were also specialist markets such as for women's poetry, gay poetry and religious poetry. More than 25% of volumes were bought because the purchaser "saw it in a shop". Nearly 20% was bought for school or study.

Women and older people were more likely to read poetry but readers vary from the more dedicated serious readers of poetry to those with a casual interest in light and humorous verse. First exposure to poetry was seen as crucial to one's attitude towards it throughout life. Barriers to contemporary poetry reading were seen as general image, lack of awareness and knowledge, cultural factors and factionalism within contemporary poetry.

Readers of non-contemporary poetry, poetry event attenders and readers of literary fiction were seen as the groups with most potential for becoming readers of contemporary poetry. Bookshops were seen as crucial to developing the audience, with more prominent locations and easier browsing, and suggestions for raising awareness included new contexts, promotional campaigns, media exposure and profiling poets. How poetry is taught in schools and the introduction of poetry to adult readers were seen as important for longer-term strategies in increasing readership.

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